

Are There Nazis in Ukraine? A Visit to Lviv

Pictures of protesters wearing Nazi insignia, and later Ukrainian army soldiers with fascist beliefs, have raised alarm.

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(Photo: Joshua Tartakovsky)

The conflict in Ukraine has been to a large degree about history and how to interpret it. The marches held in honor of World War II Ukrainian leader Stepan Bandera this past Thursday, January 1, 2015, in Kiev marking 106 years to his birth, confirm that understanding the past is essential for making sense of the future. While some have argued there are no fascists in Ukraine and that protesters in Maidan came from a wide gamut of Ukraine's civil society, in the US Congress, difficult questions were asked about US support for the neo-Nazi Right Sector and in Russia, alarm was raised when pictures of protesters wearing Nazi insignia, and later Ukrainian army soldiers with fascist beliefs, were revealed.



(Photo: Joshua Tartakovsky)

The questions of what to make of modern-day Nazis and of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), Organization for Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Stepan Bandera, suddenly became relevant and highlighted again the importance of understanding history in understanding the present. As one who lost people on both sides of my family to German and Ukrainian fascists, I was very interested in making sense of past as well as present events. To this end, I visited Lviv, Ukraine in December 2014 and read historical articles seeking to understand to what degree Ukrainain fascists were involved in World War II atrocities. This article is a culmination of these efforts.

Following the coup that took place in Kiev, Ukraine, in February 2014, rumors have surfaced of neo-Nazis marching in the streets of the city and of a “fascist takeover.” Many have dismissed such claims as “propaganda nonsense” used by Russia to discredit the toppling of a president it happened to like. When Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about fascists in Ukraine, many greeted his words with scorn and belittling. In an article titled “Putin’s Imaginary Nazis”, James Kirchick wrote that one of the groups that took a central part in the Maidan coup, “Right Sector,” known for its violent tactics, was neither fascist nor Nazi. He argued that Jews were members of Right Sector, that Israel’s ambassador met with Dmytro Yarosh, the head of the group, therefore ruling out any anti-Semitism, and that if Right Sector “had actually ‘executed’ a ‘coup,’ it would be in control of the country’s armed forces” while it was not. However, Kirchik was not entirely correct. In fact, Right Sector gangs were integrated into the National

Guard and sent to fight in East Ukraine while the Ukrainian Azov Battalion, accused of committing war crimes in the East, has attracted many Nazis. It has become undeniable that neo-Nazi units are operating in Ukraine with full governmental support.



(Photo: Aron Blesch)

The question of fascism in Ukraine has involved me personally. My grandfather on my mother's side, an American-Jewish doctor who fought during World War II for the US Army, told me that his family is originally from Lviv, Ukraine. His relatives who remained behind were exterminated by fascists. Lviv was the first city in Ukraine to be occupied by the Germans in June 1941, and a pogrom in which 2,000 people were massacred, followed shortly thereafter. On the other side of my family, my father, a Zionist activist in Kiev during the USSR period, recounted how many in his family were exterminated by the German Army and Ukrainian police in the famous Babi Yar massacre, near Kiev, in September 1941. In that occasion, 33,771 people were shot to death in one of the largest single massacres of World War II.

The subject of Nazis in the present and not only in the past has reemerged in full force. US Senator John McCain and Victoria Nuland met in person with Oleh Tyahnybok, leader of the Svoboda Party, whose former name was the Social-National Party of Ukraine and its symbol was the Wolfsangel. This is despite

the fact that Tyahnybok said earlier that Ukrainians must fight against the “Muscovite-Jewish mafia” and stop the criminal actions of “organized Jewry“. Both Svoboda and Right Sector see themselves as the ideological heirs to the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)[The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, and the Nazi Genocide in Ukraine, p.3] and as admirers of Stepan Bandera, who advocated for an independent Ukraine during World War II.

The question of who Stepan Bandera and the OUN were attracted much attention and debate, precisely due to the fact that his pictures were upheld by protesters in Lviv and Kiev. Batya Ungar-Sargon argued in Tablet Magazine that the ideology of OUN and Bandera was not inherently anti-Semitic and that assassinations were rarely carried out against Jews. In her view “at the time, Ukraine’s Jews were naturally Soviet partisans, and that made them targets for Bandera and the OUN.”

Right Sector Ukrainian parliament member Borislav Bereza , who is also Jewish and supportive of Bandera, argues that Bandera fought those who opposed Ukrainian independence, but was not an anti-Semitic. According to Bereza, the fact that Bandera was imprisoned by the Germans and later killed by the Soviets, proves that was against the Germans as he was against the Soviets and that he respected minorities. In his view, the UPA was not fascist, and Jews joined it too.



(Photo: Joshua Tartakovsky) In December 2014, I decided to go to Lviv, Ukraine, an ultra-nationalist city in West Ukraine where a huge memorial to Bandera stands, to see the place for myself and make sense of the past. Lviv, also known as Lamberg in German, Lvov in Russian and Lwow in Polish, was where the first killing of Jews by the Nazis in Ukraine took place.

A friend and I made our way to Lviv by crossing in from Poland. We were stopped on false pretenses right after crossing the border by a policeman who claimed that the driver was drunk, an entirely false accusation. We were forced to bribe him to continue on our way and realized how harsh the current economic situation must be in that police forces are probably not getting paid on time. In Lviv, I saw the house of the famous Jewish writer Shalom Aleichem. A large old sign in Yiddish announcing this reminded us of a different era, when Lviv was known as Lvov, a multicultural city, with Polish, Hungarian, Russian, German and Ukrainian influences and the third largest Jewish city in Poland, home to 100,000 Jews. Jewish residents used to fondly call the city “Lembereik” while the city had a Yiddish theater along with many Orthodox synagogues. In 1939, Poles comprised over 50%; Jews, 32% – and Ukrainians, 16%, of the city’s population. The writings in Yiddish that remain on the walls, the Jewish hospital, and the vacant mezuzah markings on the door posts, signal a vibrant Jewish community that once was. Passing by Café Shutka, I noticed the Yiddish writings on the wall, indicating that a Jewish tailor and shoemaker used to work there. The Jewish community was entirely wiped out during World War II.

The Independent State of Ukraine of 1941

The Soviet occupation of Lviv which begun on September 1939(1) ended on June 30, 1941, when the German army marched into Lviv.(2) The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) declared an independent state of Ukraine on the same day(3) and established a new government, headed by an overt anti-Semite, Yaroslav Stetsko(4). The new government launched a propaganda campaign in support of ethnic cleansing of non-Ukrainians (5). Canadian-Ukrainian Professor John-Paul Himka explains that the OUN was keen on demonstrating its loyalty to the Germans in order to win their support for a state (6).

The new prime minister of the self-declared Ukrainian state, Stetsko, who was also an aid to Stepan Bandera, made no secret of his views of Jews as parasites and published an article on this issue in a Ukrainian newspaper in Canada (7). Much like present-day Svoboda leader Oleh Tjahnybok, Stetsko saw both Moscow and the Jews as Ukraine’s eternal enemies(8) and was in favor of introducing German methods of extermination to Ukraine (9). In June 1941, Stetsko sent Bandera a message in which he stated that he was preparing an armed force to protect Ukrainians and remove the Jews(10). In the decades after the war, Stetsko, along with many other Ukrainian Nazis, was granted a haven in the US and recognized as legitimate representatives of the people of Ukraine as a whole. Stetsko was received by George H. Bush in the White House.

After thousands of political prisoners were executed by the Soviet NKVD, shortly before the retreat of the Soviet forces (11), Ukrainian militias (12) forced hundreds of Jewish residents to clean the city’s streets

while on their knees (13). The Jews were blamed for being supporters of the Soviets and were made to sing pro-USSR songs (14). After the Jews exhumed the bodies of the murdered political prisoners, they were shot by Germans and Ukrainians (15). Of an initial 2,000 Jews, 80 survived (16). Professor John-Paul Himka writes that “the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists under the leadership of Stepan Bandera provided the engine of the pogrom (17) “.Perhaps some may like to argue that the Jews should have been punished because they supported Communism, as Batya Ungar-Sargon did in Tablet Magazine, but the random arrest of hundreds of random Jews and the pogrom that followed cannot possibly be justified. Furthermore, the UPA in subsequent years, even when its leaders were in German prison, conducted a campaign of mass-murder and ethnic-cleansing against Jews and Poles.

Germany did not recognize the new independent state of Ukraine and arrested Stetsko and Bandera (18). This has led many to assume mistakenly that Bandera therefore resisted the Nazis. However, the fact that Bandera was not executed by the Germans, but was imprisoned in Berlin then transferred to Sachsenhausen in good conditions is testament to the fact that he was not seen by the Nazis as an enemy, but as a collaborator and a trouble maker. Indeed, even after his release a year later, Bandera continued to collaborate with the Nazis (19). Furthermore, actions taken by the OUN and UPA against the Germans were very small in scale (20). Historian Per Rudling clarifies that “50 percent of the UPA leaders had a background as collaborators within the military, police, or punitive organs of the Nazi German occupants and played key roles in the implementation of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union (21).” To claim that Bandera and the UPA were fighters against the Germans, however, is simply not true. At the same time, it is also incorrect to paint all Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators. The UPA had between 19,000 to 22,000 soldiers while millions of Ukrainians joined the Red Army (22).

The UPA, whose flags are adopted by present-day Svoboda and Right Sector, adhered to a racist policy of “Ukraine for Ukrainians” (23) and sought to ethnically clean the area under their control.

According to historian Per Rudling, at least 58 pogroms took place in Western Ukraine, with the number of the dead between 13,000 and 35,000. (24) “UPA soldiers testify that orders to murder Poles often overlapped with those to murder surviving Jews, something that was reflected in the military songs of the UPA.”(25)

Professor John-Paul Himka in his article The Ukrainian Insurgent Army and the Holocaust writes that in early 1944, a group of 376 Jews in Radyvyliv, who worked for the Banderas, were gradually killed by Bandera’s followers and 34 survived. In forests near Ozeriany and Kupychiv, followers of Bandera murdered all 70 Jews who worked at the labor camp (26). A commander killed the last Jewish woman in Chernoplesy although she claimed that she had nursed him when he was a child (27). Hundreds of Jews

were knived in the Ostałowiecki forest on March 1944 (28). A survivor named Moshe Maltz wrote that “When the Bandera gangs seize a Jew, they consider it a prize catch. . . . They literally slash Jews to pieces with their machetes.(29) “

In winter of 1943-1944, OUN and UPA tried to win the support of the Western allies and portrayed themselves as more tolerant, yet their killing of Jews only intensified during this period (30). A survivor named Doba Melamed recounts that “in the summer of 1943 the Banderivtsi began to kill the Poles... We found out that near the town of Antonivka in the village of Rezyca, Jews were living in liberty, that the Banderivtsi had announced that they will not kill the Jews because they are fighting against a common enemy. We went to Rezyca. In fact there were two hundred Jews living at liberty, working for the peasants as tanners, tailors, cobblers, and the like.” “The houses of the Poles stood empty. Then the Banderivtsi announced that England and America, as countries with which they were allied, had forbidden them to kill Jews, that they will allow Jews to take over the homes abandoned by the Poles... In December 1943 the Banderivtsi again began to register the Jews. After registration they announced that if one Jew escaped, the rest would be killed... In December 1943, a certain Jew knocked on our window pane and shouted: ‘Run for it, the Banderivtsi have killed the Antonivka Jews.’ We fled to the forest. We sent the forester to investigate. He came back with the news that the Banderivtsi had killed all the Jews, with axes and knives.(31)” “There are abundant testimonies of mass killing of Jews by the UPA as the Red Army approached (32).

A OUN-UPA report from 1943 makes it clear that the UPA was not a freedom movement, but a genocidal organization that was inherently anti-Semitic and racist. A report stated that “[The Jews are] almost completely liquidated, in small groups or as individuals hide in the woods and wait for a change in the political situation. We ourselves liquidated in the Horyn region seven Jewish men and a Jewish woman. (33)” A pamphlet by UPA in August 1943 stated that “the eternal enemy of Ukraine, Moscow, sends for the destruction of the Ukrainian nation bands of Gypsies, Moscovites, Jews, and other rabble, the so-called ‘red partisans. (34)” Mykhailo Smenchak, a Ukrainian nationalist who fought in the ranks of the UPA and OUN wrote when referring to the Jews that “we consider them agents of Muscovite imperialism, formerly tsarist but now proletarian. Still, we have to first beat the Muscovites and then the surviving Jews (35).”

Some claim that Jews served in the UPA and that therefore it was a liberation movement. John-Paul Himka clarifies, however, that Jews were forced to serve in the UPA as doctors and did so only so that they could survive (36). Rumors that many Jews served in the UPA voluntarily are not supported by evidence (37) and very few Jewish doctors survived their service (38). A small number of Jews were rescued in isolated cases by UPA fighters, but these were due to personal circumstances and not due to a

political motivation (39). In light of these facts, it is tragic that some Jews today choose to identify themselves with the UPA or whitewash the crimes of Bandera's followers. The Banderas used to torture their victims, hunted Jews in the woods and often lured them out of their hiding places by pretending to be partisans (40). According to Rudling, "Jewish survivors in Western Ukraine typically emphasize that with 98.5 percent of the Volhynian Jews murdered, there were few places in Europe where the Holocaust was so brutally thorough, and had it not been for the Banderites, more Jews would have survived (41)."

While the murder of Jews by the UPA continued even after the Soviet occupation in 1945 (42), the Soviet authorities were ashamed by the large number of locals who collaborated with the Nazis and were interested in laying the blame mostly on Germany with the hope of receiving financial compensation for the immense damage and loss (43). For this reason, many of the perpetrators evaded justice. To make matters worse, some of the perpetrators were later supported by the United States. The Nachtigall Battalion, that was part of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists faction led by Bandera (OUN-B) engaged in atrocities against Jews in Vinnytsia (44) while some of its soldiers participated in the Lviv pogrom (45). The Battalion, was supported by the CIA after World War II and its members were parachuted into the area to fight against the Russians. A Ukrainian lobby which contained many former Nazis was well-established in the US with the support of various Republican administrations, according to Paul H. Rosenberg.

The Historical Aftermath

How did Ukraine chose to commemorate and make sense of the atrocities that took place by the OUN and UPA? Historian Per A. Rudling in his article *The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths*, explains that in as early as 1943, the OUN engaged in historical revision and blamed the killings on Germans and Poles (46). The UPA went as far as to fabricate evidence after it was apparent that the Germans were losing the war (47). Indeed, by 1947, the UPA denied it was ever anti-Semitic or that it took part in actions against Jews (48). One OUN leader said that Ukrainians suffered from the actions of the Germans more than the Jews (49). However, OUN and UPA leaders were not executed by the Nazis, but eventually released (50), while Jews were subject to a different fate.

According to Rudling, after the election of Viktor Yushchenko, supported by the West during the "Orange Revolution," Ukrainian historians presented the UPA and OUN as groups that included Jews and rescued Jews during the Holocaust (51). However, 48% of the UPA commanders at the minimum, collaborated in various ways with the Germans (52).

In 2010, Stepan Bandera was given the title "Hero of Ukraine" by the Ukrainian government. In Lviv, we saw the larger-than-life monument to Stepan Bandera with a black-and-red flag of the Ukrainian

Insurgent Army on its side along with a bouquet of white and yellow flowers, the colors of the Ukrainian flag. Monuments dedicated to Ukrainian ultra-nationalists were established in places where Jewish ghettos once stood and in Babi Yar (53). In the Zolochiv prison in Lviv, a memorial was erected to mark the murder of Ukrainian political prisoners by the NKVD, but not the murder of Jews during the Lviv pogrom (54). Professor Himka wrote that “what the Ukrainians needed was not dialogue, but self-examination. The Ukrainians were too ready to blame others for everything: the Germans were responsible for everything in the Holocaust, while Russians and Jews were responsible for all Soviet crimes. Such attitudes pointed to mental and moral decrepitude (55).” However, it should be noted that in Eastern Ukraine where Russian culture is strong, OUN and UPA are largely despised (56).

In Lviv, support for the UPA was obvious. Red and black flags were hanging in various stores and restaurants, even in a Jewish restaurant owned by a Ukrainian family. At the Lviv State University, a massive red and black poster adorned the buildings with nationalist slogans. I heard from a local friend that the university has many student activists who received student credit for taking part in demonstrations in Maidan and that they were now busy with student activism for the war. In fact, in April 2014, some in Lviv paid tribute to the 1st Galician Division that was part of the SS. In a march in honor of the division, participants began their march at the Bandera monument and ended it at a memorial for Galician soldiers.

During my visit, I explored the Jewish quarter of the city. I saw the remains of an old synagogue, “The Golden Rose” while a “Jewish-themed” restaurant owned by a Ukrainian family was established next to it. Various pictures of Jewish life in the area are hung in the restaurant. Prices are not set at the restaurant, but one must “bargain” for them in the supposedly “Jewish” way. Small red-and-black flags of the same Ukrainian Insurgent Army whose people murdered the local Jewish community are placed on the bar, and a large charity box allows visitors to put in money for the Ukrainian soldiers fighting in the Donbass, many of whom share the Nazi ideology.



(Photo: Joshua

Tartakovsky)

As I continued to wander the city, more and more troubling signs emerged. Various stores were selling red-and-black flags. T-shirts depicting Stepan Bandera as a hero, and Vladimir Putin as a Hitler were also sold. Fascist graffiti of red-and-black depicting Hitler's famous words "God is With Us" appeared not to disturb various passer-bys. A floor mat depicting Putin's face alongside EU and Ukraine flags was sold in a different store, while in yet another, a major sign advertised recruitment to the ultra-fascist Right Sector. In an open-market downtown, various scarves depicting Bandera were sold, along with toilet paper with the face of Putin and others. I rushed to take a few pictures, but did not want to attract much attention. Luckily, there were not many people in the area as the market was closing due to the snow and I managed to take various pictures. A stranger gave me an ominous look, so I walked away from the area quickly. In the morning, the snow was already piled high and we made our way to the car, driving back to the border. We passed by vacant lands covered in snow and I could not help but think of the many Jewish communities that once lived in the area and how those who engaged in the ethnic cleansing and murder of neighboring Poles are glorified in the present.

Lviv is a beautiful city, but for me personally it signals more of its absence than of what it is today. The memorial for the Jewish ghetto of Lviv was built mostly by private donations from Jewish foundations. The existence of multiple UPA flags in the city, means that few have come to regret the ethnic cleansing of Poles and the mass-murder of Jews and Poles. Furthermore, the current mayor pays a monthly salary of 1,000 hryvna to former fighters of the OUN. The fact that neo-Nazis now form part of army units sent

to fight in East Ukraine and that Ukraine has been experiencing a wave of extreme nationalism as marches have recently been held in Kiev marking the 106th birthday of Bandera, means that it may be difficult to place the demons unleashed by the US back into the bottle. Ukrainian fascism is still very much alive, with even Prime Minister Yatsenyuk referring to the population in East Ukraine as “subhumans.” After making our way to Poland the next day, we saw several carriers transporting modern tanks. As the US continues to support Ukrainian fascists and delivers tanks to the wider region, the demons of the past have returned. The same fascist slogans of “Death to the Enemies” are being voiced in Kiev, with Ukrainian soldiers calling for “purification of the nation.”

Notes:

Special thanks to Professor John-Paul Himka, a Ukrainian-Canadian Professor of History at the University of Alberta for giving me access to his academic work.

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